MOCKINGJAY

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For Cap, Charlie, and Isabel

PART I
"THE ASHES"

1

I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood. Over there was the kitchen table. The bricks of the chimney, which collapsed in a charred heap, provide a point of reference for the rest of the house. How else could I orient myself in this sea of gray?

Almost nothing remains of District 12. A month ago, the Capitol's firebombs obliterated the poor coal miners' houses in the Seam, the shops in the town, even the Justice Building. The only area that escaped incineration was the Victor's Village. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps so anyone forced to come here on Capitol business would have somewhere decent to stay. The odd reporter. A committee assessing the condition of the coal mines. A squad of Peacekeepers checking for returning refugees.

But no one is returning except me. And that's only for a brief visit. The authorities in District 13 were against my coming back. They viewed it as a costly and pointless venture, given that at least a dozen invisible hovercraft are circling overhead for my protection and there's no intelligence to be gained. I had to see it, though. So much so that I made it a condition of my cooperating with any of their plans.

Finally, Plutarch Heavensbee, the Head Gamemaker who had organized the rebels in the Capitol, threw up his hands. "Let her go. Better to waste a day than another month. Maybe a little tour of Twelve is just what she needs to convince her we're on the same side."

The same side. A pain stabs my left temple and I press my hand against it. Right on the spot where Johanna Mason hit me with the coil of wire. The memories swirl as I try to sort out what is true and what is false. What series of events led me to be standing in the ruins of my city? This is hard because the effects of the concussion she gave me haven't completely subsided and my thoughts still have a tendency to jumble together. Also, the drugs they use to control my pain and mood sometimes make me see things. I guess. I'm still not entirely convinced that I was hallucinating the night the floor of my hospital room transformed into a carpet of writhing snakes.

I use a technique one of the doctors suggested. I start with the simplest things I know to be true and work toward the more complicated. The list begins to roll in my head. . . .

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is thought to be dead. Most likely he is dead. It is probably best if he is dead. . . .

"Katniss. Should I come down?" My best friend Gale's voice reaches me through the headset the rebels insisted I wear. He's up in a hovercraft, watching me carefully, ready to swoop in if anything goes amiss. I realize I'm crouched down now, elbows on my thighs, my head braced between

my hands. I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown. This won't do. Not when they're finally weaning me off the medication.

I straighten up and wave his offer away. "No. I'm fine." To reinforce this, I begin to move away from my old house and in toward the town. Gale asked to be dropped off in 12 with me, but he didn't force the issue when I refused his company. He understands I don't want anyone with me today. Not even him. Some walks you have to take alone.

The summer's been scorching hot and dry as a bone. There's been next to no rain to disturb the piles of ash left by the attack. They shift here and there, in reaction to my footsteps. No breeze to scatter them. I keep my eyes on what I remember as the road, because when I first landed in the Meadow, I wasn't careful and I walked right into a rock. Only it wasn't a rock—it was someone's skull. It rolled over and over and landed faceup, and for a long time I couldn't stop looking at the teeth, wondering whose they were, thinking of how mine would probably look the same way under similar circumstances.

I stick to the road out of habit, but it's a bad choice, because it's full of the remains of those who tried to flee. Some were incinerated entirely. But others, probably overcome with smoke, escaped the worst of the flames and now lie reeking in various states of decomposition, carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. *I killed you,* I think as I pass a pile. *And you. And you.*

Because I did. It was my arrow, aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena, that brought on this

firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of Panem into chaos.

In my head I hear President Snow's words, spoken the morning I was to begin the Victory Tour. *"Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem."* It turns out he wasn't exaggerating or simply trying to scare me. He was, perhaps, genuinely attempting to enlist my help. But I had already set something in motion that I had no ability to control.

Burning. Still burning, I think numbly. The fires at the coal mines belch black smoke in the distance. There's no one left to care, though. More than ninety percent of the district's population is dead. The remaining eight hundred or so are refugees in District 13—which, as far as I'm concerned, is the same thing as being homeless forever.

I know I shouldn't think that; I know I should be grateful for the way we have been welcomed. Sick, wounded, starving, and empty-handed. Still, I can never get around the fact that District 13 was instrumental in 12's destruction. This doesn't absolve me of blame—there's plenty of blame to go around. But without them, I would not have been part of a larger plot to overthrow the Capitol or had the wherewithal to do it.

The citizens of District 12 had no organized resistance movement of their own. No say in any of this. They only had the misfortune to have me. Some survivors think it's good luck, though, to be free of District 12 at last. To have escaped the endless hunger and oppression, the perilous

mines, the lash of our final Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread. To have a new home at all is seen as a wonder since, up until a short time ago, we hadn't even known that District 13 still existed.

The credit for the survivors' escape has landed squarely on Gale's shoulders, although he's loath to accept it. As soon as the Quarter Quell was over — as soon as I had been lifted from the arena — the electricity in District 12 was cut, the televisions went black, and the Seam became so silent, people could hear one another's heartbeats. No one did anything to protest or celebrate what had happened in the arena. Yet within fifteen minutes, the sky was filled with hoverplanes and the bombs were raining down.

It was Gale who thought of the Meadow, one of the few places not filled with old wooden homes embedded with coal dust. He herded those he could in its direction, including my mother and Prim. He formed the team that pulled down the fence — now just a harmless chain-link barrier, with the electricity off — and led the people into the woods. He took them to the only place he could think of, the lake my father had shown me as a child. And it was from there they watched the distant flames eat up everything they knew in the world.

By dawn the bombers were long gone, the fires dying, the final stragglers rounded up. My mother and Prim had set up a medical area for the injured and were attempting to treat them with whatever they could glean from the woods. Gale had two sets of bows and arrows, one hunting knife, one fishing net, and over eight hundred terrified people to feed. With the help of those who were able-bodied, they

managed for three days. And that's when the hovercraft unexpectedly arrived to evacuate them to District 13, where there were more than enough clean, white living compartments, plenty of clothing, and three meals a day. The compartments had the disadvantage of being underground, the clothing was identical, and the food was relatively tasteless, but for the refugees of 12, these were minor considerations. They were safe. They were being cared for. They were alive and eagerly welcomed.

This enthusiasm was interpreted as kindness. But a man named Dalton, a District 10 refugee who'd made it to 13 on foot a few years ago, leaked the real motive to me. "They need you. Me. They need us all. Awhile back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed a bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us." Back in 10, he'd worked on one of the beef ranches, maintaining the genetic diversity of the herd with the implantation of long-frozen cow embryos. He's very likely right about 13, because there don't seem to be nearly enough kids around. But so what? We're not being kept in pens, we're being trained for work, the children are being educated. Those over fourteen have been given entry-level ranks in the military and are addressed respectfully as "Soldier." Every single refugee was granted automatic citizenship by the authorities of 13.

Still, I hate them. But, of course, I hate almost everybody now. Myself more than anyone.

The surface beneath my feet hardens, and under the carpet of ash, I feel the paving stones of the square. Around

the perimeter is a shallow border of refuse where the shops stood. A heap of blackened rubble has replaced the Justice Building. I walk to the approximate site of the bakery Peeta's family owned. Nothing much left but the melted lump of the oven. Peeta's parents, his two older brothers — none of them made it to 13. Fewer than a dozen of what passed for District 12's well-to-do escaped the fire. Peeta would have nothing to come home to, anyway. Except me . . .

I back away from the bakery and bump into something, lose my balance, and find myself sitting on a hunk of sun-heated metal. I puzzle over what it might have been, then remember Thread's recent renovations of the square. Stocks, whipping posts, and this, the remains of the gallows. Bad. This is bad. It brings on the flood of images that torments me, awake or asleep. Peeta being tortured — drowned, burned, lacerated, shocked, maimed, beaten — as the Capitol tries to get information about the rebellion that he doesn't know. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to reach for him across the hundreds and hundreds of miles, to send my thoughts into his mind, to let him know he is not alone. But he is. And I can't help him.

Running. Away from the square and to the one place the fire did not destroy. I pass the wreckage of the mayor's house, where my friend Madge lived. No word of her or her family. Were they evacuated to the Capitol because of her father's position, or left to the flames? Ashes billow up around me, and I pull the hem of my shirt up over my mouth. It's not wondering what I breathe in, but who, that threatens to choke me.

The grass has been scorched and the gray snow fell here as well, but the twelve fine houses of the Victor's Village are unscathed. I bolt into the house I lived in for the past year, slam the door closed, and lean back against it. The place seems untouched. Clean. Eerily quiet. Why did I come back to 12? How can this visit help me answer the question I can't escape?

"What am I going to do?" I whisper to the walls. Because I really don't know.

People keep talking at me, talking, talking, talking. Plutarch Heavensbee. His calculating assistant, Fulvia Cardew. A mishmash of district leaders. Military officials. But not Alma Coin, the president of 13, who just watches. She's fifty or so, with gray hair that falls in an unbroken sheet to her shoulders. I'm somewhat fascinated by her hair, since it's so uniform, so without a flaw, a wisp, even a split end. Her eyes are gray, but not like those of people from the Seam. They're very pale, as if almost all the color has been sucked out of them. The color of slush that you wish would melt away.

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts — most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol — can count on to blaze the path to victory. I won't have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to

make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances—as if *that* doesn't sound horribly familiar—and all I have to do is play my part. Sometimes I listen to them and sometimes I just watch the perfect line of Coin's hair and try to decide if it's a wig. Eventually, I leave the room because my head starts to ache or it's time to eat or if I don't get aboveground I might start screaming. I don't bother to say anything. I simply get up and walk out.

Yesterday afternoon, as the door was closing behind me, I heard Coin say, "I told you we should have rescued the boy first." Meaning Peeta. I couldn't agree more. He would've been an excellent mouthpiece.

And who did they fish out of the arena instead? Me, who won't cooperate. Beetee, an older inventor from 3, who I rarely see because he was pulled into weapons development the minute he could sit upright. Literally, they wheeled his hospital bed into some top secret area and now he only occasionally shows up for meals. He's very smart and very willing to help the cause, but not really firebrand material. Then there's Finnick Odair, the sex symbol from the fishing district, who kept Peeta alive in the arena when I couldn't. They want to transform Finnick into a rebel leader as well, but first they'll have to get him to stay awake for more than five minutes. Even when he is conscious, you have to say everything to him three times to get through to his brain. The doctors say it's from the electrical shock he received in the arena, but I know it's a lot more complicated than that. I know that Finnick can't focus on anything in 13 because he's trying so hard to see what's happening in the Capitol to

Annie, the mad girl from his district who's the only person on earth he loves.

Despite serious reservations, I had to forgive Finnick for his role in the conspiracy that landed me here. He, at least, has some idea of what I'm going through. And it takes too much energy to stay angry with someone who cries so much.

I move through the downstairs on hunter's feet, reluctant to make any sound. I pick up a few remembrances: a photo of my parents on their wedding day, a blue hair ribbon for Prim, the family book of medicinal and edible plants. The book falls open to a page with yellow flowers and I shut it quickly because it was Peeta's brush that painted them.

What am I going to do?

Is there any point in doing anything at all? My mother, my sister, and Gale's family are finally safe. As for the rest of 12, people are either dead, which is irreversible, or protected in 13. That leaves the rebels in the districts. Of course, I hate the Capitol, but I have no confidence that my being the Mockingjay will benefit those who are trying to bring it down. How can I help the districts when every time I make a move, it results in suffering and loss of life? The old man shot in District 11 for whistling. The crackdown in 12 after I intervened in Gale's whipping. My stylist, Cinna, being dragged, bloody and unconscious, from the Launch Room before the Games. Plutarch's sources believe he was killed during interrogation. Brilliant, enigmatic, lovely Cinna is dead because of me. I push the thought away because it's too impossibly painful to dwell on without losing my fragile hold on the situation entirely.

What am I going to do?

To become the Mockingjay . . . could any good I do possibly outweigh the damage? Who can I trust to answer that question? Certainly not that crew in 13. I swear, now that my family and Gale's are out of harm's way, I could run away. Except for one unfinished piece of business. Peeta. If I knew for sure that he was dead, I could just disappear into the woods and never look back. But until I do, I'm stuck.

I spin on my heel at the sound of a hiss. In the kitchen doorway, back arched, ears flattened, stands the ugliest tomcat in the world. "Buttercup," I say. Thousands of people are dead, but he has survived and even looks well fed. On what? He can get in and out of the house through a window we always left ajar in the pantry. He must have been eating field mice. I refuse to consider the alternative.

I squat down and extend a hand. "Come here, boy." Not likely. He's angry at his abandonment. Besides, I'm not offering food, and my ability to provide scraps has always been my main redeeming quality to him. For a while, when we used to meet up at the old house because we both disliked this new one, we seemed to be bonding a little. That's clearly over. He blinks those unpleasant yellow eyes.

"Want to see Prim?" I ask. Her name catches his attention. Besides his own, it's the only word that means anything to him. He gives a rusty meow and approaches me. I pick him up, stroking his fur, then go to the closet and dig out my game bag and unceremoniously stuff him in. There's no other way I'll be able to carry him on the hovercraft, and he means the world to my sister. Her goat, Lady, an animal

of actual value, has unfortunately not made an appearance.

In my headset, I hear Gale's voice telling me we must go back. But the game bag has reminded me of one more thing that I want. I sling the strap of the bag over the back of a chair and dash up the steps to my bedroom. Inside the closet hangs my father's hunting jacket. Before the Quell, I brought it here from the old house, thinking its presence might be of comfort to my mother and sister when I was dead. Thank goodness, or it'd be ash now.

The soft leather feels soothing and for a moment I'm calmed by the memories of the hours spent wrapped in it. Then, inexplicably, my palms begin to sweat. A strange sensation creeps up the back of my neck. I whip around to face the room and find it empty. Tidy. Everything in its place. There was no sound to alarm me. What, then?

My nose twitches. It's the smell. Cloying and artificial. A dab of white peeks out of a vase of dried flowers on my dresser. I approach it with cautious steps. There, all but obscured by its preserved cousins, is a fresh white rose. Perfect. Down to the last thorn and silken petal.

And I know immediately who's sent it to me.

President Snow.

When I begin to gag at the stench, I back away and clear out. How long has it been here? A day? An hour? The rebels did a security sweep of the Victor's Village before I was cleared to come here, checking for explosives, bugs, anything unusual. But perhaps the rose didn't seem noteworthy to them. Only to me.

Downstairs, I snag the game bag off the chair, bouncing it along the floor until I remember it's occupied. On the lawn, I frantically signal to the hovercraft while Buttercup thrashes. I jab him with my elbow, but this only infuriates him. A hovercraft materializes and a ladder drops down. I step on and the current freezes me until I'm lifted on board.

Gale helps me from the ladder. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I say, wiping the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

He left me a rose! I want to scream, but it's not information I'm sure I should share with someone like Plutarch looking on. First of all, because it will make me sound crazy. Like I either imagined it, which is quite possible, or I'm overreacting, which will buy me a trip back to the drug-induced dreamland I'm trying so hard to escape. No one will fully understand—how it's not just a flower, not even just President Snow's flower, but a promise of revenge—because no one else sat in the study with him when he threatened me before the Victory Tour.

Positioned on my dresser, that white-as-snow rose is a personal message to me. It speaks of unfinished business. It whispers, *I can find you. I can reach you. Perhaps I am watching you now.*

2

Are there Capitol hoverplanes speeding in to blow us out of the sky? As we travel over District 12, I watch anxiously for signs of an attack, but nothing pursues us. After several minutes, when I hear an exchange between Plutarch and the pilot confirming that the airspace is clear, I begin to relax a little.

Gale nods at the howls coming from my game bag. "Now I know why you had to go back."

"If there was even a chance of his recovery." I dump the bag onto a seat, where the loathsome creature begins a low, deep-throated growl. "Oh, shut up," I tell the bag as I sink into the cushioned window seat across from it.

Gale sits next to me. "Pretty bad down there?"

"Couldn't be much worse," I answer. I look in his eyes and see my own grief reflected there. Our hands find each other, holding fast to a part of 12 that Snow has somehow failed to destroy. We sit in silence for the rest of the trip to 13, which only takes about forty-five minutes. A mere week's journey on foot. Bonnie and Twill, the District 8 refugees who I encountered in the woods last winter, weren't so far from their destination after all. They apparently didn't make it, though. When I asked about them in 13, no one seemed to know who I was talking about. Died in the woods, I guess.

From the air, 13 looks about as cheerful as 12. The rubble isn't smoking, the way the Capitol shows it on television, but there's next to no life aboveground. In the seventy-five years since the Dark Days — when 13 was said to have been obliterated in the war between the Capitol and the districts — almost all new construction has been beneath the earth's surface. There was already a substantial underground facility here, developed over centuries to be either a clandestine refuge for government leaders in time of war or a last resort for humanity if life above became unlivable. Most important for the people of 13, it was the center of the Capitol's nuclear weapons development program. During the Dark Days, the rebels in 13 wrested control from the government forces, trained their nuclear missiles on the Capitol, and then struck a bargain: They would play dead in exchange for being left alone. The Capitol had another nuclear arsenal out west, but it couldn't attack 13 without certain retaliation. It was forced to accept 13's deal. The Capitol demolished the visible remains of the district and cut off all access from the outside. Perhaps the Capitol's leaders thought that, without help, 13 would die off on its own. It almost did a few times, but it always managed to pull through due to strict sharing of resources, strenuous discipline, and constant vigilance against any further attacks from the Capitol.

Now the citizens live almost exclusively underground. You can go outside for exercise and sunlight but only at very specific times in your schedule. You can't miss your schedule. Every morning, you're supposed to stick your right arm

in this contraption in the wall. It tattoos the smooth inside of your forearm with your schedule for the day in a sickly purple ink. *7:00—Breakfast. 7:30—Kitchen Duties. 8:30—Education Center, Room 17.* And so on. The ink is indelible until *22:00—Bathing*. That's when whatever keeps it water resistant breaks down and the whole schedule rinses away. The lights-out at 22:30 signals that everyone not on the night shift should be in bed.

At first, when I was so ill in the hospital, I could forgo being imprinted. But once I moved into Compartment 307 with my mother and sister, I was expected to get with the program. Except for showing up for meals, though, I pretty much ignore the words on my arm. I just go back to our compartment or wander around 13 or fall asleep somewhere hidden. An abandoned air duct. Behind the water pipes in the laundry. There's a closet in the Education Center that's great because no one ever seems to need school supplies. They're so frugal with things here, waste is practically a criminal activity. Fortunately, the people of 12 have never been wasteful. But once I saw Fulvia Cardew crumple up a sheet of paper with just a couple of words written on it and you would've thought she'd murdered someone from the looks she got. Her face turned tomato red, making the silver flowers inlaid in her plump cheeks even more noticeable. The very portrait of excess. One of my few pleasures in 13 is watching the handful of pampered Capitol "rebels" squirming as they try to fit in.

I don't know how long I'll be able to get away with my complete disregard for the clockwork precision of attendance

required by my hosts. Right now, they leave me alone because I'm classified as mentally disoriented — it says so right on my plastic medical bracelet — and everyone has to tolerate my ramblings. But that can't last forever. Neither can their patience with the Mockingjay issue.

From the landing pad, Gale and I walk down a series of stairways to Compartment 307. We could take the elevator, only it reminds me too much of the one that lifted me into the arena. I'm having a hard time adjusting to being underground so much. But after the surreal encounter with the rose, for the first time the descent makes me feel safer.

I hesitate at the door marked *307*, anticipating the questions from my family. "What am I going to tell them about Twelve?" I ask Gale.

"I doubt they'll ask for details. They saw it burn. They'll mostly be worried about how you're handling it." Gale touches my cheek. "Like I am."

I press my face against his hand for a moment. "I'll survive."

Then I take a deep breath and open the door. My mother and sister are home for *18:00 — Reflection*, a half hour of downtime before dinner. I see the concern on their faces as they try to gauge my emotional state. Before anyone can ask anything, I empty my game bag and it becomes *18:00 — Cat Adoration*. Prim just sits on the floor weeping and rocking that awful Buttercup, who interrupts his purring only for an occasional hiss at me. He gives me a particularly smug look when she ties the blue ribbon around his neck.

My mother hugs the wedding photo tightly against her chest and then places it, along with the book of plants, on

our government-issued chest of drawers. I hang my father's jacket on the back of a chair. For a moment, the place almost seems like home. So I guess the trip to 12 wasn't a complete waste.

We're heading down to the dining hall for *18:30—Dinner* when Gale's communicuff begins to beep. It looks like an oversized watch, but it receives print messages. Being granted a communicuff is a special privilege that's reserved for those important to the cause, a status Gale achieved by his rescue of the citizens of 12. "They need the two of us in Command," he says.

Trailing a few steps behind Gale, I try to collect myself before I'm thrown into what's sure to be another relentless Mockingjay session. I linger in the doorway of Command, the high-tech meeting/war council room complete with computerized talking walls, electronic maps showing the troop movements in various districts, and a giant rectangular table with control panels I'm not supposed to touch. No one notices me, though, because they're all gathered at a television screen at the far end of the room that airs the Capitol broadcast around the clock. I'm thinking I might be able to slip away when Plutarch, whose ample frame has been blocking the television, catches sight of me and waves urgently for me to join them. I reluctantly move forward, trying to imagine how it could be of interest to me. It's always the same. War footage. Propaganda. Replaying the bombings of District 12. An ominous message from President Snow. So it's almost entertaining to see Caesar Flickerman, the eternal host of the Hunger Games, with his painted face and

sparkly suit, preparing to give an interview. Until the camera pulls back and I see that his guest is Peeta.

A sound escapes me. The same combination of gasp and groan that comes from being submerged in water, deprived of oxygen to the point of pain. I push people aside until I am right in front of him, my hand resting on the screen. I search his eyes for any sign of hurt, any reflection of the agony of torture. There is nothing. Peeta looks healthy to the point of robustness. His skin is glowing, flawless, in that full-body-polish way. His manner's composed, serious. I can't reconcile this image with the battered, bleeding boy who haunts my dreams.

Caesar settles himself more comfortably in the chair across from Peeta and gives him a long look. "So . . . Peeta . . . welcome back."

Peeta smiles slightly. "I bet you thought you'd done your last interview with me, Caesar."

"I confess, I did," says Caesar. "The night before the Quarter Quell . . . well, who ever thought we'd see you again?"

"It wasn't part of my plan, that's for sure," says Peeta with a frown.

Caesar leans in to him a little. "I think it was clear to all of us what your plan was. To sacrifice yourself in the arena so that Katniss Everdeen and your child could survive."

"That was it. Clear and simple." Peeta's fingers trace the upholstered pattern on the arm of the chair. "But other people had plans as well."

Yes, other people had plans, I think. Has Peeta guessed, then, how the rebels used us as pawns? How my rescue was

arranged from the beginning? And finally, how our mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, betrayed us both for a cause he pretended to have no interest in?

In the silence that follows, I notice the lines that have formed between Peeta's eyebrows. He has guessed or he has been told. But the Capitol has not killed or even punished him. For right now, that exceeds my wildest hopes. I drink in his wholeness, the soundness of his body and mind. It runs through me like the morphling they give me in the hospital, dulling the pain of the last weeks.

"Why don't you tell us about that last night in the arena?" suggests Caesar. "Help us sort a few things out."

Peeta nods but takes his time speaking. "That last night . . . to tell you about that last night . . . well, first of all, you have to imagine how it felt in the arena. It was like being an insect trapped under a bowl filled with steaming air. And all around you, jungle . . . green and alive and ticking. That giant clock ticking away your life. Every hour promising some new horror. You have to imagine that in the past two days, sixteen people have died—some of them defending you. At the rate things are going, the last eight will be dead by morning. Save one. The victor. And your plan is that it won't be you."

My body breaks out in a sweat at the memory. My hand slides down the screen and hangs limply at my side. Peeta doesn't need a brush to paint images from the Games. He works just as well in words.

"Once you're in the arena, the rest of the world becomes very distant," he continues. "All the people and things you

loved or cared about almost cease to exist. The pink sky and the monsters in the jungle and the tributes who want your blood become your final reality, the only one that ever mattered. As bad as it makes you feel, you're going to have to do some killing, because in the arena, you only get one wish. And it's very costly."

"It costs your life," says Caesar.

"Oh, no. It costs a lot more than your life. To murder innocent people?" says Peeta. "It costs everything you are."

"Everything you are," repeats Caesar quietly.

A hush has fallen over the room, and I can feel it spreading across Panem. A nation leaning in toward its screens. Because no one has ever talked about what it's really like in the arena before.

Peeta goes on. "So you hold on to your wish. And that last night, yes, my wish was to save Katniss. But even without knowing about the rebels, it didn't feel right. Everything was too complicated. I found myself regretting I hadn't run off with her earlier in the day, as she had suggested. But there was no getting out of it at that point."

"You were too caught up in Beetee's plan to electrify the salt lake," says Caesar.

"Too busy playing allies with the others. I should have never let them separate us!" Peeta bursts out. "That's when I lost her."

"When you stayed at the lightning tree, and she and Johanna Mason took the coil of wire down to the water," Caesar clarifies.

"I didn't want to!" Peeta flushes in agitation. "But I

couldn't argue with Beetee without indicating we were about to break away from the alliance. When that wire was cut, everything just went insane. I can only remember bits and pieces. Trying to find her. Watching Brutus kill Chaff. Killing Brutus myself. I know she was calling my name. Then the lightning bolt hit the tree, and the force field around the arena . . . blew out."

"Katniss blew it out, Peeta," says Caesar. "You've seen the footage."

"She didn't know what she was doing. None of us could follow Beetee's plan. You can see her trying to figure out what to do with that wire," Peeta snaps back.

"All right. It just looks suspicious," says Caesar. "As if she was part of the rebels' plan all along."

Peeta's on his feet, leaning in to Caesar's face, hands locked on the arms of his interviewer's chair. "Really? And was it part of her plan for Johanna to nearly kill her? For that electric shock to paralyze her? To trigger the bombing?" He's yelling now. "She didn't know, Caesar! Neither of us knew anything except that we were trying to keep each other alive!"

Caesar places his hand on Peeta's chest in a gesture that's both self-protective and conciliatory. "Okay, Peeta, I believe you."

"Okay." Peeta withdraws from Caesar, pulling back his hands, running them through his hair, mussing his carefully styled blond curls. He slumps back in his chair, distraught.

Caesar waits a moment, studying Peeta. "What about your mentor, Haymitch Abernathy?"

Peeta's face hardens. "I don't know what Haymitch knew."

"Could he have been part of the conspiracy?" asks Caesar.

"He never mentioned it," says Peeta.

Caesar presses on. "What does your heart tell you?"

"That I shouldn't have trusted him," says Peeta. "That's all."

I haven't seen Haymitch since I attacked him on the hovercraft, leaving long claw marks down his face. I know it's been bad for him here. District 13 strictly forbids any production or consumption of intoxicating beverages, and even the rubbing alcohol in the hospital is kept under lock and key. Finally, Haymitch is being forced into sobriety, with no secret stashes or home-brewed concoctions to ease his transition. They've got him in seclusion until he's dried out, as he's not deemed fit for public display. It must be excruciating, but I lost all my sympathy for Haymitch when I realized how he had deceived us. I hope he's watching the Capitol broadcast now, so he can see that Peeta has cast him off as well.

Caesar pats Peeta's shoulder. "We can stop now if you want."

"Was there more to discuss?" says Peeta wryly.

"I was going to ask your thoughts on the war, but if you're too upset . . ." begins Caesar.

"Oh, I'm not too upset to answer that." Peeta takes a deep breath and then looks straight into the camera. "I want everyone watching—whether you're on the Capitol or the

rebel side—to stop for just a moment and think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely? In the hopes that—what? Some decent species will inherit the smoking remains of the earth?"

"I don't really . . . I'm not sure I'm following . . ." says Caesar.

"We can't fight one another, Caesar," Peeta explains. "There won't be enough of us left to keep going. If everybody doesn't lay down their weapons—and I mean, as in *very soon*—it's all over, anyway."

"So . . . you're calling for a cease-fire?" Caesar asks.

"Yes. I'm calling for a cease-fire," says Peeta tiredly. "Now why don't we ask the guards to take me back to my quarters so I can build another hundred card houses?"

Caesar turns to the camera. "All right. I think that wraps it up. So back to our regularly scheduled programming."

Music plays them out, and then there's a woman reading a list of expected shortages in the Capitol—fresh fruit, solar batteries, soap. I watch her with uncharacteristic absorption, because I know everyone will be waiting for my reaction to the interview. But there's no way I can process it all so quickly—the joy of seeing Peeta alive and unharmed, his defense of my innocence in collaborating with the rebels, and his undeniable complicity with the Capitol now that he's called for a cease-fire. Oh, he made it sound as if he were condemning both sides in the war. But at this point,

with only minor victories for the rebels, a cease-fire could only result in a return to our previous status. Or worse.

Behind me, I can hear the accusations against Peeta building. The words *traitor*, *liar*, and *enemy* bounce off the walls. Since I can neither join in the rebels' outrage nor counter it, I decide the best thing to do is clear out. As I reach the door, Coin's voice rises above the others. "You have not been dismissed, Soldier Everdeen."

One of Coin's men lays a hand on my arm. It's not an aggressive move, really, but after the arena, I react defensively to any unfamiliar touch. I jerk my arm free and take off running down the halls. Behind me, there's the sound of a scuffle, but I don't stop. My mind does a quick inventory of my odd little hiding places, and I wind up in the supply closet, curled up against a crate of chalk.

"You're alive," I whisper, pressing my palms against my cheeks, feeling the smile that's so wide it must look like a grimace. Peeta's alive. And a traitor. But at the moment, I don't care. Not what he says, or who he says it for, only that he is still capable of speech.

After a while, the door opens and someone slips in. Gale slides down beside me, his nose trickling blood.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I got in Boggs's way," he answers with a shrug. I use my sleeve to wipe his nose. "Watch it!"

I try to be gentler. Patting, not wiping. "Which one is he?"

"Oh, you know. Coin's right-hand lackey. The one who tried to stop you." He pushes my hand away. "Quit! You'll bleed me to death."

The trickle has turned to a steady stream. I give up on the first-aid attempts. "You fought with Boggs?"

"No, just blocked the doorway when he tried to follow you. His elbow caught me in the nose," says Gale.

"They'll probably punish you," I say.

"Already have." He holds up his wrist. I stare at it uncomprehendingly. "Coin took back my communicuff."

I bite my lip, trying to remain serious. But it seems so ridiculous. "I'm sorry, Soldier Gale Hawthorne."

"Don't be, Soldier Katniss Everdeen." He grins. "I felt like a jerk walking around with it anyway." We both start laughing. "I think it was quite a demotion."

This is one of the few good things about 13. Getting Gale back. With the pressure of the Capitol's arranged marriage between Peeta and me gone, we've managed to regain our friendship. He doesn't push it any further — try to kiss me or talk about love. Either I've been too sick, or he's willing to give me space, or he knows it's just too cruel with Peeta in the hands of the Capitol. Whatever the case, I've got someone to tell my secrets to again.

"Who are these people?" I say.

"They're us. If we'd had nukes instead of a few lumps of coal," he answers.

"I like to think Twelve wouldn't have abandoned the rest of the rebels back in the Dark Days," I say.

"We might have. If it was that, surrender, or start a nuclear war," says Gale. "In a way, it's remarkable they survived at all."

Maybe it's because I still have the ashes of my own district on my shoes, but for the first time, I give the people of 13 something I have withheld from them: credit. For staying alive against all odds. Their early years must have been terrible, huddled in the chambers beneath the ground after their city was bombed to dust. Population decimated, no possible ally to turn to for aid. Over the past seventy-five years, they've learned to be self-sufficient, turned their citizens into an army, and built a new society with no help from anyone. They would be even more powerful if that pox epidemic hadn't flattened their birthrate and made them so desperate for a new gene pool and breeders. Maybe they are militaristic, overly programmed, and somewhat lacking in a sense of humor. They're here. And willing to take on the Capitol.

"Still, it took them long enough to show up," I say.

"It wasn't simple. They had to build up a rebel base in the Capitol, get some sort of underground organized in the districts," he says. "Then they needed someone to set the whole thing in motion. They needed you."

"They needed Peeta, too, but they seem to have forgotten that," I say.

Gale's expression darkens. "Peeta might have done a lot of damage tonight. Most of the rebels will dismiss what he said immediately, of course. But there are districts where the resistance is shakier. The cease-fire's clearly President Snow's idea. But it seems so reasonable coming out of Peeta's mouth."

I'm afraid of Gale's answer, but I ask anyway. "Why do you think he said it?"

"He might have been tortured. Or persuaded. My guess is he made some kind of deal to protect you. He'd put forth the idea of the cease-fire if Snow let him present you as a confused pregnant girl who had no idea what was going on when she was taken prisoner by the rebels. This way, if the districts lose, there's still a chance of leniency for you. If you play it right." I must still look perplexed because Gale delivers the next line very slowly. "Katniss . . . he's still trying to keep you alive."

To keep me alive? And then I understand. The Games are still on. We have left the arena, but since Peeta and I weren't killed, his last wish to preserve my life still stands. His idea is to have me lie low, remain safe and imprisoned, while the war plays out. Then neither side will really have cause to kill me. And Peeta? If the rebels win, it will be disastrous for him. If the Capitol wins, who knows? Maybe we'll both be allowed to live—if I play it right—to watch the Games go on. . . .

Images flash through my mind: the spear piercing Rue's body in the arena, Gale hanging senseless from the whipping post, the corpse-littered wasteland of my home. And for what? For what? As my blood turns hot, I remember other things. My first glimpse of an uprising in District 8. The victors locked hand in hand the night before the Quarter Quell. And how it was no accident, my shooting that arrow into the force field in the arena. How badly I wanted it to lodge deep in the heart of my enemy.

I spring up, upsetting a box of a hundred pencils, sending them scattering around the floor.

"What is it?" Gale asks.

"There can't be a cease-fire." I lean down, fumbling as I shove the sticks of dark gray graphite back into the box. "We can't go back."

"I know." Gale sweeps up a handful of pencils and taps them on the floor into perfect alignment.

"Whatever reason Peeta had for saying those things, he's wrong." The stupid sticks won't go in the box and I snap several in my frustration.

"I know. Give it here. You're breaking them to bits." He pulls the box from my hands and refills it with swift, concise motions.

"He doesn't know what they did to Twelve. If he could've seen what was on the ground—" I start.

"Katniss, I'm not arguing. If I could hit a button and kill every living soul working for the Capitol, I would do it. Without hesitation." He slides the last pencil into the box and flips the lid closed. "The question is, what are you going to do?"

It turns out the question that's been eating away at me has only ever had one possible answer. But it took Peeta's ploy for me to recognize it.

What am I going to do?

I take a deep breath. My arms rise slightly—as if recalling the black-and-white wings Cinna gave me—then come to rest at my sides.

"I'm going to be the Mockingjay."